



Evelyne Micollier (ed.), *Sexual Cultures in East Asia. The Social Construction of Sexuality and Sexual Risk in a Time of AIDS*

London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, 279 p.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Michael Black

- 1 Evelyn Micollier with *Sexual Cultures in East Asia* takes an innovative approach to questions of sexuality, to HIV/AIDS and to civil society in East Asia (Cambodia, China, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam). The pioneering aspect of this work stems mainly from the choice of a constructivist approach to examining sexual identity and the social stigma attached to HIV/AIDS.
- 2 Initially presented in July 2000, during an international conference in Amsterdam organised by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the contributions—which have been revised for this publication—are of very high quality both because they are the results of long-term empirical research and because they are written by thirteen researchers and practitioners—both Asian and Western—from different but complementary disciplines (anthropology, history, medicine, sociology, development and communication).
- 3 In her introduction, Evelyn Micollier reminds us of the two-fold objective of this book, the first, to study “sexual cultures” in East Asian societies, i.e., “the consensual models of cultural ideas in relation to sexual behaviour in a given group” (G. Herdt). The “sexual cultures”, which the book approaches from the starting points of the role of the sex industry, of kinship systems and of gender questions, stem from sexual cultures

“caught between tradition and transition” (Part I). The second objective aims to measure these sexual cultures against the HIV/AIDS pandemic which today affects at least 7.4 million Asians : it is a question of understanding how and why sexual risk is socially constructed (Part II).

- 4 The six contributions in the first part of the book take as their point of departure the role played by the sex industry in the social construction of sexuality. Thus Evelyne Micollier seeks to shed light on the dynamic economic, social and cultural factors which shape a sexual culture in which, as she sees it, sexual work plays a major role because of the rules of marriage and because of the traditional role of women in Confucian families. Using a range of examples—in China and Vietnam in particular—the author asserts, rather unconventionally, the existence of a certain compatibility between prostitution and marriage which is based on a genuine interdependence, or in other words on a “dialectical relationship between marital and extra-marital sexuality”. Using a study of three “Red Light Districts” in Southern China (Guangdong, Guanxi, Guizhou), Pan Suiming provides a novel picture of prostitution, of the work of these women and of their living conditions in China. The author launches a direct (courageous ?) attack on the Chinese government's strategy to eradicate prostitution. She demonstrates that in parallel with the quasi-police, which while unofficial, can arrest sex workers, the weapon on which the government bases its offensive, which is to say surveillance by the public, is no longer effective. The Chinese population adopts an inert, which is to say uncritical attitude towards prostitution. Pan Suiming also emphasises the tensions between official dogma on the one hand, which does not dare recognise either the ineffectiveness of national policies to control prostitution, or even the direct link between unemployment and prostitution, and on the other hand the obvious connivance of local governments in the development of these districts. She refers to the “atrophy of official ideology” (p. 51) on the subject of prostitution.
- 5 For his part, Wim Lunsing has carried out an anthropological study of the sex industry in Japan in order to assess to what extent Japanese sex workers (male and female adults, transsexuals, and young girls) have chosen or been forced into their situations. Obviously at the heart of this analysis the question of prostitution agencies is raised.
- 6 In the case of Cambodia, Annuska Derks, after showing how perceptions of prostitution are linked both to social norms and to ethnicity (in particular where Vietnamese women are concerned), engages in a typology of sex workers based on a distinction between free choice and coercion. Aware of the dangers of a dichotomy between women as victims and women as free agents, she states that it is a useful means of distinguishing between the various paths that lead to becoming a sex worker, but also of giving “an image of the contradictions which exist between oppression and exploitation on the one hand, and power and freedom on the other” (p. 137). The reasons for short-, medium- or long-term participation in paid sexual activity are many and various. It can be voluntary participation for financial or social mobility reasons, the temporary “sale” of young girls by their parents or relatives who are heavily in debt or keen to gain access to modernity (for example by buying a TV set), or else the trafficking of young girls in difficult economic or emotional circumstances, who are misled as to the nature of their future work when they are recruited.
- 7 The difficult and sensitive question of the economic value of prostitution also lies at the heart of the first part. Ian Walter seeks to establish the level of Vietnam's economic dependence on prostitution. His contribution is centred on what he calls the “sites of

dependence” on prostitution, which is to say the institutions and individuals who benefit from it. The primary site to benefit from the sex industry remains the family, which receives a major part of the money produced. In this way a young girl displays a traditional form of behaviour in Confucian societies : filial devotion. Ian Walter then explains how the intermediaries—hotels, taxis, the police and certain bureaucracies—are in many ways dependent on prostitution, and finally how the sex industry is a major component in the national economy. Arriving at some conclusions similar to those of Pan Suiming, he states that the local authorities maintain these activities despite the opposition of official rhetoric. Aware of the economic value of prostitution, they seem to refrain from taking on the industry in any effective way.

- 8 Lastly, in the case of Vietnamese society, and from a feminist perspective, Paula-Frances Kelly analyses gender and sexuality as social constructs. She takes as her point of departure the attitudes, behaviours and diverse messages aimed at young girls and boys from childhood, through school and social institutions. She concludes from these that there is a constant and accepted attitude of superiority on the part of Vietnamese men towards women which results from the construction of masculinity by society. This situation, in many ways, explains why it falls to the girls to ensure the support of the family, in particular through prostitution. There remains the fact that this inequality, which she sees as having been reinforced by a return to traditional Confucian values, does not augur well for the HIV/AIDS situation.
- 9 The second part of the book focuses on sexual education and on relations between the state and society based on an analysis of national campaigns to fight sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in particular. Some contributors focus particularly on the discourse of various players in order to better grasp the mechanisms that construct sexual risk and stigmatisation. As Christian Henriot explains in his study of the control of STDs and of prostitution in Shanghai during the Republican period, this construction is obviously not new. Indeed, during this period, far from seeking to understand the social dynamics of prostitution and the spread of STDs, the Shanghai authorities constructed a repressive and stigmatising discourse aimed at prostitution, which had become a political issue calling for corrective intervention.
- 10 Stigmatisation is also to be found at the heart of the study of the Taiwanese media carried out by Hsu Mei-ling and his team. Between 1984 and 1999, media discourse on HIV/AIDS went through an evolution. AIDS was successively perceived as coming from the West, as an illness which affected homosexuals, as coming from Southeast Asia, as stimulating the changing identity of certain social groups, and finally as a forum for debate about Human Rights. In Taiwan today, AIDS is still often perceived as the illness of drug users. This discourse brings into conflict those who consider themselves to be protected from the virus and those who, either by their rejection of social norms (homosexuals, prostitutes, drug users), or by their revealed HIV infection, are stigmatised by the others. Each of these groups are constructed by reference to the other, even if the boundaries between the two can be porous (as in the case of newborn babies who are infected).
- 11 The second part shows how a question of public health such as sexuality can produce social change. In Vietnam, in the case of sex education programmes, Marie-Eve Blanc shows that this question gave rise to intense debate. In Taiwan, the emergence of civil society is studied by Evelyne Micollier from an analysis of NGOs and their methods for

fighting HIV/AIDS: commemoration, supporting sex education programmes, protecting the rights of the people living with HIV/AIDS, etc. This contribution sets up a complementary relationship between the authorities and the NGOs in the sense of “collective management” of health issues¹. Moreover, although she bases herself on a limited number of NGOs—which was the case at the end of the 1990, but is no longer—Evelyne Micollier provides a picture of a varied and dynamic struggle against HIV/AIDS, which remains today an unquestioned advantage for this country in the face of the epidemic.

- 12 Overall, this is an important and thoroughly documented book, so dense that a concluding chapter would have been welcome. It provides its readers with unique keys to understanding societies that we have often, at least in matters of sexuality, treated with exoticism or judged in reference to the West. It is also an essential book for activists in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the effectiveness of whose work is intrinsically tied to an understanding of the sexual cultures of the societies in which they work.

NOTES DE FIN

1. Evelyne Micollier, “Emergence de la société civile à Taiwan, vers une gestion collective des problèmes de santé” (The emergence of civil society in Taiwan, towards collective management of health problems), in Christine Chaigne, Catherine Paix, Chantal Zheng (eds.), *Taiwan : Enquête sur une identité*, (Taiwan : Inquiry Into An Identity), Paris, Karthala, 1999, pp. 309-331.